

A black and white photograph showing several soldiers on horseback in a desert setting. The soldiers are wearing military uniforms and caps. In the background, a military vehicle is visible. The overall scene suggests a historical military operation.

Spirit of Arm



CAMP shows have a long history. Musical entertainments for American soldiers have been around since a fife-and-drum detachment played for Ethan Allan's volunteers after the capture of Fort Ticonderoga a full month before the Continental Army was created.



(Left) Soldiers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry (The Old Guard) portray a company of soldiers bound for their port of embarkation and, ultimately, for World War I in Europe.

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Story by Tom Mani

(Main photo) The artillery sections of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment practice maneuvers with caisson and gun carriages on Fort Myer's drill field, circa 1930. They were the finale of the post's Friday-afternoon shows where, in the confines of the Riding Hall, they wheeled their teams about, ending with salvos of blanks from their artillery.



Scenes from Fort Myer, Va., during the days of the Friday Frolics and the Society Circus:

(Top) Elaborate braids and plumed headgear mark the European hussar-style uniforms of the riders of the six-horse teams of grays pulling caissons outside present-day Conmy Hall.

(Center) PVT Sakleben, whose first name is lost in time, practices for a 1940 show at the South Gymnasium, which was built in 1934-1935 after the old Riding Hall burned down.

(Bottom) Soldiers of Troop F, 3rd U.S. Cavalry, enhance their Mongol attire with a yoked pair of oxen. The shows the soldiers did in Fort Myer's Riding Hall seated 1,800 — far too few for the demand. This year's Spirit of America shows will seat 15,000 at each of the six performances, June 14 to 18.



But when you start talking about military pageantry — retreats, tattoos, parades — one major Army command knows that it carries its flag farther and higher than any other organization in the world: the U.S. Army Military District of Washington.

MDW, which has ceremonial excellence as one of its core missions, has created a special extravaganza this year to honor the Army on its 225th birthday. “Spirit of America — A Soldier’s Journal” is a blend of music, history and showmanship that celebrates the role of the Army in the nation’s life.

While Spirit of America has long been a Washington tradition, it has not been presented since 1996. Now it can be seen from June 14 to 18 at the MCI Center in Washington, D.C.

MDW’s ceremonial mission itself has historical roots, according to Fort Myer, Va., historian Kim Holien. The task was picked up from the units that garrisoned Washington before World War II, the war during which MDW was created. Entertainment by and for soldiers in the war years was directed overseas, closer to the action, where it was needed most.

Between the world wars, elements of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment conducted periodic military shows at Fort Myer during the winter, capping them with a Society Circus that drew participation from the Washington community.

The 3rd Armored Cav. Regt. is now stationed at Fort Carson, Colo., but the shows put on by “The Brave Rifles” drew the same acclaim given to performances of the 3rd U.S. Infantry (The Old Guard) today. Interestingly, both units earned their names through

(Left) SGT William Stevenson establishes the concept of the 1996 Spirit of America show at US Air Arena in Landover, Md., as being "A Soldier's Journal." The desk bearing the journal is like that used in GEN Ulysses S. Grant's acceptance of the surrender of the Army of Virginia at Appomattox, Va.

(Right) The U.S. Army Drill Team makes a smoke-filled entrance. Performances by the silent drill team hush audiences as they strain to hear the cadence of the maneuvers.

(Below) Company A, 3rd U.S. Infantry, the commander-in-chief's guard, rushes the audience in a mock bayonet attack. The uniforms are worn at military ceremonies throughout the year.



distinctive service in The Mexican War of 1846.

Also conducting Washington ceremonies before World War II was the 16th Inf. Brigade from Fort Hunt, Va., down-river from Fort Myer. Less used was the 10th Cav. Regt., a predominantly black unit that, like the 3rd, had served "out west" in Indian campaigns and was scattered along the eastern seaboard after World War I.

Life in the 10th Cav., now at Fort Hood, Texas, was not glamorous in those days, although the "Buffalo Soldiers" did ride in presidential inauguration parades.

The passing of the horse cavalry from the scene has changed the sort of shows the Army puts on in Washington.

Although horses are still a part of the pageantry, the Fort Myer Riding Hall once boasted all-horse shows put on before audiences of 1,800 soldiers and civilians who filled the two tiers of the balcony. Polo games were held on the field where general officer retirement ceremonies now take place.

GEN Lucian K. Truscott Jr. described some of the performances in his book "The Twilight of the U.S. Cavalry." The Machine-Gun Troop

specialized in acrobatics on horseback — "monkey drill" — and concluded with a drill with packhorses where soldiers went into action, firing their weapons.

Troop E developed a musical ride, with 24 riders, that involved many intricate movements and was sometimes capped with "trios of riders crossing through the square pen jump in the center of the hall from each of the four directions in a perfectly timed and coordinated movement."

Troop F specialized in rough-riding, usually costumed in western dress, although a squad of 16 men rode





(Top) The Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps drum section explodes with sound during a performance set at Spirit of America.

(Above) Besides a mounted band, the cavalry had the services of this musical cowboy. His partner carried a more familiar tool of the soldier, a rifle.

“Cossack,” standing in their saddles or picking up handkerchiefs from the floor with their teeth as they galloped by, “all at breakneck speed.”

The artillery batteries worked a drill with four gun carriages and caissons that was the finale of the show. The circling ended with the guns going into action with salvos of blanks, filling the hall with “sound, smoke, and the smell of powder.”

The annual Society Circus involved selection of a theme and devising roles for debutantes, Boy Scouts and others outside of the regiment. One show, related by Truscott, portrayed the city of Technocracy in the year 2933 and the musings of the dictator Technor and his underling Machnor, pining for days when “men were men, ladies were beautiful, and they all rode horses.” The show then evolved as a dream of the pageantry of yore.

The shows were so important that when the Riding Hall burned to the ground in February 1934, money was found to have a new hall — the present Conmy Hall — rebuilt within a year. The first show staged there was “The History of the United States Army.”

Truscott observed that as the mounted regimental band played music of the period, “groups of soldiers were presented armed, equipped and uniformed as were their predecessors in 1776, 1812, 1846, 1861, during the Indian Wars, 1898 and 1918. The final group to enter the hall showed the highly trained technicians who are the soldiers of today with their radios, automatic weapons and scout cars. The music of this modern group was appropriately, ‘There’s Something about a Soldier.’”

When war again broke out, the officers and soldiers who had created shows like these went to fronts in Europe and the Pacific that had no use for horse cavalry. Yet the arenas of ceremonial drill may



Soldiers of each era of American history get due attention, even those serving in peace missions in such strife-torn regions as Bosnia and Kosovo — where the horse transportation of yesteryear is now the Humvee (above). And no retrospective would be complete without a look at the Civil War (above, right).

also have been where the “seeds of victory were sown,” not only, in GEN Douglas MacArthur’s phrase, on “fields of friendly strife.”

The Washington of today is not that of the 1920s and ’30s when a cavalry troop could ride the countryside between Fort Myer and Fort Belvoir, Va., but it is not yet the world of Technor and Machnor.

Horses are still ridden, and military pageantry lives on. The Army’s 225th birthday marks a sweep of years that includes also the heroism of World War II and Korea, the bravery of Vietnam and the victory in the Cold War. New missions now challenge the skills, imaginations and hearts of soldiers.

There is something about a soldier, and it’s worth singing about. That’s the mission: Spirit of America, June 14 to 18 at the MCI Center. Check for free tickets by calling toll-free (800) 701-5097 or going to the Spirit of America website at www.mdw.army.mil/spirit.htm. □



Who carries forward the tradition of showmanship at Fort Myer? Soldiers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry and The U.S. Army Band, “Pershing’s Own,” such as the Old Guard silent drill team soloists (above) and the saxophone quartet of Pershing’s Own (below).

